

Philosophic Exchange

Volume 5

Number 1 *Volume 5* (1974)

Article 4

1974

Singer on Speciesism

Kevin Donaghy

The College at Brockport

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](https://philosophycommons.org/)

Repository Citation

Donaghy, Kevin (1974) "Singer on Speciesism," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol5/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.



The College at
BROCKPORT
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



KEVIN DONAGHY
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
S. U. C. Brockport

SINGER ON SPECIESISM

by

Kevin Donaghy

If you subscribe to the view that the killing of a man is a more serious matter than the killing of a chicken, or that something is radically amiss about the practice of producing expensive pet food when children are starving in Biafra, then you are, to use Professor Singer's term, a speciesist. But I don't think this label should bother you. Speciesism is, I think, a defensible position.

When one judges that it is a more serious matter to kill a man than a chicken or that it is morally wrong that so much money is spent on pet food when children are starving, one is not excluding animals from membership in the moral community, as Singer sometimes seems to suggest. Nor would one want to. It is intuitively clear that certain ways of treating animals are objectionable on moral grounds. What one is doing when one makes such judgments is tacitly assigning human beings a privileged position in that community. One is suggesting that, other things being equal, when the interests of human beings conflict with the interests of animals, the former are to be given the greater weight.

What would justify speciesism? Singer observes that if human beings are to be regarded as morally privileged in this way, there must be some characteristic which is possessed by humans but not by animals, or possessed by humans in a higher degree than animals, and which justifies assigning greater weight to the interests of humans. And a good part of his argument is designed to show that there can be no such characteristic. I would like to examine two of those arguments.

Suppose that superior intelligence is said to be the morally relevant characteristic. If superior intelligence does not entitle one man to exploit another, then why, asks Singer, should it entitle humans to exploit non-humans? The word 'exploit' is unfortunate, since exploitation is presumably never justified. But there is an argument here, and it amounts to this. We would all agree that superior intelligence does not entitle one man to a more privileged position in the moral community than another. If we are to be consistent, we should also agree that superior intelligence does not entitle humans to a more privileged position than animals. So—if anything does entitle humans to special consideration, it is certainly not superior intelligence. This argument presumably can be generalized to rule out not only intelligence but any characteristic that is possessed by humans in a higher degree than animals.

Is this a sound argument; I am inclined to think not. Suppose someone were to reason as follows. We all agree that greater experience and maturity do not entitle one man to the obedience of another. So we should all agree, if we are to be consistent, that greater experience and maturity do not entitle adults to the obedience of children. Therefore, if anything does entitle adults to the obedience

SINGER ON SPECIESISM

of children, it is not the greater experience and maturity of the former. This piece of reasoning is quite obviously unsound. Since Professor Singer's argument exhibits the same form, it too would appear to be unsound.

What entitles adults to the obedience of children is not their greater experience and maturity as such, but the absence in children of a certain minimal level of experience and maturity. It may well be true, and I think it is, that while superior intelligence as such does not entitle humans to a privileged position in the moral community, the absence in animals of a certain minimal level of intelligence does. At any rate, Singer's argument does not succeed in ruling out intelligence, or anything else for that matter, as a morally relevant characteristic.

A second argument put forward by Singer amounts to this. Take any characteristic which is said to justify a privileged moral status for humans—again, for example, intelligence. One invariably finds that some animals, adult pigs for example, possess that characteristic in a higher degree than some humans, human infants, for example. If anything, an adult pig is more intelligent than a human infant. The speciesist might object that in as much as the infant is potentially an adult, he is to be granted the same moral status. But then he is left with the problem, insuperable if one is to believe Singer, of explaining how “mere potential gives rise to rights.”

Singer is here assuming that a normal human infant, while potentially more intelligent than an adult pig, is actually less intelligent. And this, it seems to me, is just false. To say that an animal, whether human or otherwise, has a certain level of intelligence is to say something not about his actual but about his potential problem solving abilities.

Suppose I am listening to a three year old playing the piano and I remark that the child is talented. When I make this remark, I do not mean to say that the child plays well. Most likely, he plays very badly. What I do mean to say is that he has the potential to become an excellent player. Similarly, if I observe a three year old and remark that he is very intelligent, I do not mean to say that he thinks efficiently or productively, or that he is able to complete successfully certain complex intellectual tasks. After all, a three year old, however intelligent he may be, is not able to do any of these things. What I do mean to say is that he has the capacity or potential (as yet unrealized) to think efficiently and productively. When a child, however young, provides evidence of superior intelligence, we do not say that the child is *potentially* intelligent, we say simply that he *is* intelligent. Thus, it is a mistake to say that an adult pig is more intelligent than a normal human infant, since the infant's potential to think and act intelligently, and hence his intelligence, far outstrips that of the animal.

Adult pigs may not be more intelligent than normal human infants, but certainly they are more intelligent than *some* human beings, all those whose intellectual potential is even more limited than that of the pig, the massively brain damaged, for example. So isn't Professor Singer's objection sustained after all? I think not. The speciesist who adopts superior intelligence as the characteristic which justifies man's privileged status in the moral community is committed to the view that such human vegetables do not enjoy this status. But this should pose no particular problem for the speciesist. In fact, it may

KEVIN DONAGHY

well be fully in accord with his intuitions. It certainly is with mine. While the killing of a normally intelligent infant is just as serious an offense as the killing of a normally intelligent adult, both acts would seem to be far more serious than the killing of a person so severely limited that he lacked the intellectual capacities of an adult pig.

Very briefly, I would like to ask why superior intelligence does appear to be a likely candidate for the characteristic, if there is one, which justifies man's privileged position in the moral community. After all, animals are in many respects superior to ourselves. They have greater strength, speed, more highly developed sensory apparatus, and so on. So isn't it rather a case of stacking the deck to choose the one area in which humans are clearly superior to animals? Not really. Concomitant with superior intelligence are a number of important capacities, the capacities for great virtue, for great love, for great suffering, for great happiness, and so on. These capacities do intuitively appear to be morally relevant, relevant in the sense that our moral attitudes toward entities, the value we place on them, and the ways in which we treat them should be determined at least in part by the presence or absence of these capacities.